DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 370 593 IR 055 046

AUTHOR Seels, Jody M.; Seels, Barbara A.
TITLE Civil War Photography and Its Impact from 1863-1993.
PUB DATE 93
NOTE 11p.; In: Visual Literacy in the Digital Age: Selected Readings from the Annual Conference of the International Visual Literacy Association (25th, Rochester, New York, October 13-17, 1993); see IR 055 055.
PUB TYPE Historical Materials (060) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Civil War (United States); Editing; Photographic Equipment; *Photographs; Photography; *Photojournalism; *Reprography; *Technological Advancement; *United States History
IDENTIFIERS *Digitizing

ABSTRACT

The United States Civil War was the first American war to be documented extensively by photographs, and these photographs have had tremendous impact and importance. During the war and immediately following, the cost and difficulty of reproducing photographs limited their appeal. Economic pressures actually caused Matthew Brady, the most famous photographer of the Civil War, to sell his collection to the War Department. The invention of the half-tone process, which enabled mass reproduction of photographs, renewed public interest in photography and gave historians ready access to photographic materials. As Civil War survivors died, photographs became vital records of detail and lent a feeling of timelessness to the works they illustrated. The ease with which photographs may now be edited through digitized methods means that it is increasingly important to establish the history of each photograph and to record any changes made. (Contains 26 references.) (SLD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 370 593

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Civil War Photography and Its Impact from 1863-1993

by Jody Seels

Barbara A. Seels

University of Pittsburgh
4A16 Forbes Quandrangle
Pittsburgh, PA 15260

IR055049

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Alice Walker

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Civil War Photography and its Impact from 1863-1993

Jody M. Seels
Barbara A. Seels

Since its invention in 1839, photography has been an integral part of recording events that have since become history. Understanding a nation's participation in wars is an important part of understanding its people and character. The United States Civil War was the first American war to be extensively documented by photographs. Although the use of photography had limited effect during the conflict, the photographs have had tremendous impact and importance in the over 100 years since the event. The lack of the technology necessary for efficient reproduction of photographs during, and immediately after, the Civil War impeded the use of photography for effective communication. With the invention of the half-tone process, which enabled mass-reproduction of photographs, public interest in the photographs was renewed. Historians and scholars at last began to realize the historical value of the photographs. Since 1866, countless books, magazines, documentaries, and movies have used photographs to communicate to the general public why the Civil War is such an important part of America's history. Photography has been a key to this understanding. It constitutes a host of visual primary sources that allow us to see the actual images of people, places, objects, and events long since gone.

The Civil War was not the first war to utilize photography. In 1920, a set of about sixty anonymous photographic plates from the Mexican War (1846-1848) was discovered. The British use of photography in the Crimean War was an important influence on photographers at the start of the American Civil War. Roger Fenton, the premier photographer of the Crimea, proved that war photography in the field was possible. The majority of photographs taken in the Crimea were of officers, camp life and the common soldier. Because they were intended to be shown to the royal family, few grisly photographs were taken. However, Fenton's published photographs helped convince American photographers that there was business potential for war photographs.

There were a number of technological advances in photography prior to the Civil War. In 1851, Frederick Scott Archer invented the wet-plate process which shortened exposure time; however, reproduction was still impractical and costly. The wet-plate process required on-site development, thus leading to the development

IR055094

of "whatsit wagons," the traveling darkrooms used by the photographers of the Civil War.

Photography had a limited impact during the war because the necessary technologies that increased its impact had not yet been developed. Portrait photography was widely viewed and popular. By the start of the war, Mathew Brady had well established studios in both New York and Washington, and numerous lesser known portrait studios were found throughout the country. Prominent figures from all aspects of society posed for Brady. Collections of the photographs in the form of "cartes de visite" (small portraits given in place of calling cards) and stereoscopic views became the rage. When war broke out, many soldiers visited these studios to have inexpensive photographs, called "tintypes," taken of themselves to send home to their loved ones as remembrances. In return, families of soldiers would have their portraits taken and sent to the soldiers to comfort them. Photographs were even used on campaign buttons, including one of Lincoln which prompted him to say, "Brady and the Cooper Union [speech] made me president." [1]

In the field, photography of the war was significantly more difficult.
The equipment was large and bulky. Sensitizing chemicals and large numbers of glass plates had to be transported. Groups of photographers could be found following the armies to battle The exposure time for wet-plate negatives, anywhere from 10 to 30 seconds, was so long that action shots could not be taken; therefore, photographers were restricted to photographing the aftermath with its corpse-strewn battlefields, bloated bodies, and rows of dead soldiers.

This *New York Times* review of Mathew Brady's 1863 exhibition on Antietam describes how battlefield photographs shocked the American public.

> The living that throng Broadway care little perhaps for the Dead at Antietam, but we fancy they would jostle less carelessly down the great thoroughfare, saunter less at their ease, were a few dripping bodies, fresh from the field, laid along the pavement...As it is, the dead of the battlefield come to us very rarely, even in dreams. We see the list in the morning paper at breakfast, but dismiss its recollection with the coffee. There is a confused mass of names, but they are all strangers; we forget the horrible significance that dwells amid the jumble of type...
>
> MR. BRADY has done something to bring home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of war. If he has not brought bodies and laid them in our dooryards and along the streets, he has done something very like it. At the door of his gallery hangs a little placard, "The Dead of Antietam." Crowds of people are constantly going up the stairs; follow them and you find them bending over photographic views of that fearful battle-field, taken immediately after the action. Of all objects of horror one would think the battle-field should stand preeminent, that it should bear away the palm of repulsiveness. But on the

> contrary, there is a terrible fascination about it that draws one near these pictures, and makes him loth to leave them. You will see hushed, reverent groups standing around these weird copies of carnage, bending down to look in the pale faces of the dead, chained by the strange spell that dwells in dead men's eyes. It seems somewhat singular that the same sun that looked down on the faces of the slain, blistering them, blotting out from the bodies all semblance to humanity, and hastening corruption, should have thus caught their features upon canvas, and given them perpetuity for ever. But so it is. [2]

These photographs were among the first images to show war from a realistic rather than a romantic view. Exhibitions, such as Brady's, drew large audiences. Yet, these images had limited impact because they could only be reproduced in newspapers as woodcut engravings; therefore, they were not seen by the majority of the general public. Newspapers mostly based their woodcuts on artists' sketches rather than photographs because sketches did not need detail for effectiveness. Sketches could capture the action of the battle making the woodcuts more dramatic, and often much more appealing, than many of the gruesomely realistic photographs. At times, photographers even rearranged bodies and equipment after the battles in an attempt to make the photographs more dramatic and appealing to publishers and the general public. [3] Despite these efforts the photographs never gained much popularity, and the vast majority of Americans were not greatly influenced by the photographs during the war because they did not see them.

In general, the public's perception of the significance of the photographs did not increase in the period immediately following the war. The people's desire to forget the war further hindered the use of photographs as communication.

> But interest in the war did wane almost immediately after Appomattox. Perhaps the market had been saturated by energetic purveyors of these images. More likely, Americans preferred not to remember the conflict they saw in the brutal reality of the photograph. Very soon myth and romanticism took the place of remembered fact. And the photos themselves were forgotten, misplaced, or deliberately destroyed. [4]

Alexander Gardner compiled and released his *Photographic Sketch Book of the Civil War* in 1866, with photographs taken by Timothy O'Sullivan and himself. [5] The book was a commercial failure. It was expensive because each of the photographs had to be manually reproduced and mounted on the pages. Moreover, the public was just not interested in the book; they simply wanted to forget the war. Mathew Brady invested approximately one hundred thousand dollars of his own money in photographing the war. Brady had relied on the sale of stereoscopic war views to return his investment. These views were popular during the war, but their sale almost stopped completely after the war. His photographic exhibitions, while well attended, did not nearly cover the cost of the photography. Brady had to give his creditors, E. and H. T. Anthony and Company, one of

his sets of negatives to meet his bill. Brady entreated Congress to purchase two thousand portrait negatives in 1871, but Congress did not act. On account of the financial panic of 1873, Brady lost much of his real estate property and his New York gallery. He was unable to meet storage payments for his negative collection so it was put up for public auction and bought by the War Department for $2840. Persuaded by President Garfield, Congress gave Brady an appropriation of $25,000 for the collection.

The collection was poorly handled, resulting in many broken and scratched plates. The duplicate set of Brady negatives stored by the E. and H. T. Anthony and Company was virtually forgotten until rediscovered by John C. Taylor of Hartford, Connecticut in an attic. The collection was purchased by Colonel Arnold Rand of Boston and General Albert Ordway of Washington, who carefully preserved and catalogued the negatives and periodically added to the collection. [6] Many negatives were stored by other collectors, veterans' societies and the photographers themselves.

> They were the keepers of the image, men with an appreciation-and a vision-that others lacked. Finally, just before the turn of the century, their hour, and that of their photographs, came at last. It arrived on the wings of technology, the development of the halftone printing process. At last, photographs could be easily and speedily "printed" in massive quantities. At the same time, there was a new generation of Americans who had not lived through the war, who did not feel the old pains revived by seeing the graphic destruction depicted in the photographs. The people and the image were ready for one another. [7]

When reproduction became easier, historians began to fully realize the significance of the Civil War photographs and started to use them in books, periodicals, and eventually movies and documentaries. The first of these books appeared in 1894, *The Memorial War Book* by George F. Williams. Williams' book was just the beginning. In 1912 the ten-volume *Photographic History of the Civil War* was published. Its editor, Francis T. Miller, and his associates, spent years contacting former soldiers, generals and photographers. [8] Roy M. Mason was hired by Miller to search the South for war photographs. The result was a monumental accomplishment containing thousands of photographs reproduced from the original prints and plates. The accompanying text was often provided by Civil War veterans. New technologies led to publication of these and other books which made the photographs accessible to a larger audience.

Interest in the photographs of the Civil War continued to increase. In subsequent decades, numerous Civil War movies, such as *Birth of a Nation* (1927), *Gone With the Wind* (1939), *The Red Badge of Courage* (1951), and more recently, *Glory* (1990) were produced. Often these films referred to Civil War photographs for set and costume reconstruction. Many of these movies fell short of authenticity with scenes being overly dramatic, even romanticizing war. This contrasted with the initial impact of the Civil War photographs of the 1860's which did much to dispel most people's glorified image of war that was seen in the paintings of the period. [9]

In the *Photographic History of the Civil War*, many romantic ideas are reiterated. Allan Trachtenberg compares captions in the Miller series with Gardner's captions:

> The 1911 text describes it as a scene of troops en route to battle...The text weaves the image into a narrative of the 'eve' of the first battle of the war, a moment of lighthearted innocence, laughing young men 'hardly realizing in the contagion of their patriotic ardor the grim meaning of real war.' The picture shows something else...The Gardner text is more explicit in detail...Gardner's text saturates the image, encouraging the viewer to incorporate its details into a generalized narrative of war as a disruption of nature. [10]

Miller and his collaborators accepted idealizations and did not question captions given to the pictures by the photographers and press in the 1860's. Thus, many errors were passed on from the *Photographic History of the Civil War* to subsequent books.

In 1975, William A. Frassanito sought to correct some of these errors. Frassanito analyzed hundreds of Civil War photographs to determine where, when and by whom they were taken. By studying the photographs, he was able to determine if, and in what way, the bodies were staged by the photographers. Frassanito shot the scenes again so that he could better understand the original photographs. However, the photographic conditions were not exactly duplicated because he used modern cameras with lenses that were not equivalent to those used by Civil War photographers. Frassanito published three books: *Gettysburg: A Journey in Time*, *Grant and Lee: The Virginia Campaigns: 1864-1865* and *Antietam: The Photographic Legacy of America's Bloodiest Days* in which he dispels many of the previously unquestioned captions and titles. [11]

From 1981 to 1984, a six-volume series, *Images of War*, containing hundreds of previously unpublished photographs appeared. [12] The *Image of War* series tried to correct many of the errors found in the captions. In the late 1980's, an exhibition and corresponding book entitled the *Eyes of Time: Photojournalism in America* were presented. [13] Both covered how the use of photography in the Civil War related to and affected the use of photojournalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Photographs have been important in helping both historians and the general public gain an understanding that is more detailed and realistic than that of previous wars which relied only on artists' representations. In 1990, Ken Burns released his ten hour documentary, *The Civil War*. [14] The documentary integrated the photographs with other means of communication, such as narrative, letters, diaries, and music, to increase the impact the information would have on the public. [15] Some historians are bothered by the documentary's lack of accuracy in the use of photographs in relation to the narrative. [16]

> I look for what I call an equivalent - that is, an image that may not be what an expert would certify as belonging to the precise moment I'm describing, but that combines with the narration to make a synthesis that's good history, so that you say, "My God, I

> hear that. I know what they must have felt." [17]

Nevertheless, Burns' documentary brought an understanding of the conflict to a large viewing audience. The effectiveness and impact of this documentary could not have been achieved without the availability of photography as a means of communication. The photographs brought the viewers closer to the people and events of the Civil War by letting them feel the emotions of both the ordinary soldiers and prominent figures in the period. The detail of the photographs made the war, and the people involved, seem more realistic than wars and participants rendered by artists' interpretations only. When paintings and photographs of the time period are compared, the importance of the photograph becomes more apparent because details omitted in a portrait of Lincoln are clearly seen in a photograph of Lincoln. [18]

The significance of the photographs has increased immensely since the Civil War. For, as the decades passed, the people who had first-hand knowledge of the Civil War died, leaving historians no choice but to rely on forms of recorded information to understand the war. Photography has provided society with an extensive record of detail in uniforms, weapons, forts, and a soldier's camp life. Battle-maps can be reconstructed from photographs. The photographs confirm letters, diary entries, and other written correspondence. When compared with photographs from subsequent wars, similarities give history a feeling of timelessness.

In many ways Civil War photography actually seems to foreshadow the recorded image of World War II. A photograph of the dead against a fence on the battlefield of Antietam is a companion piece to a scene of corpses along a hedgerow on the battlefield of France made some 80 years later. Together they seem part of one time-almost the same war, a part of the same continuing series of organized struggles which have characterized human history.

> The living skeletons of Union soldiers released from Andersonville prison in 1865 cannot be distinguished from similar photographic records of the victims of the Belsen concentration camp more than three-quarters of a century later. [19]

Because of photography we now have a record of the people who so greatly shaped our country. The detail in photographic portraits provides a wealth of information on the personalities and emotions of both leaders and common people. One can look at portraits of Lincoln to see the emotional and physical toll the war exacted on him. Photographic portraits allow us to observe the changes in Lincoln by comparing photographs taken at different times during his campaign and presidency. Comparing a photograph taken on February 27, 1860 at the time of the Cooper Union Institute speech during his first campaign [20] with a portrait taken on November 15, 1863 [21] three years into the war, the lines on his face are markedly deeper. A photograph taken on April 9, 1865 five days before his death is one of the few pictures taken of Lincoln where he is smiling. He had just heard news that Lee had surrendered to Grant. [22]

Photographs can never be a complete factual source because the viewer can only see what the photographer decided was important to see. The photographs can never be looked at from the perspective of someone who was alive during the war. They will always be viewed and studied from a modern perspective.

> After 100 years or so, photographs no longer trigger the living memory of a concrete experience, but become historical abstractions which can only help another generation imagine how it was. [23]

Wagner described Civil War photography as a type of "time bomb." There were immediate effects, but the aftershocks are immensely more important. They provide the key to understanding an event in our country's history, the Civil War, that has a profound impact on the development and character of the United States. [24]

We will never know what it was like to be at the Brady exhibition of black and white photographs from Antietam in 1863. We do know that Civil War photographs command interest even today. When photographs of soldiers killed in Somalia or Bosnia are shown on television in schools, some students laugh as a body explodes. This may be because so much violence is seen on entertainment programming, actual war photographs no longer seem real. On the other hand, war photographs have increased impact now because they are seen by more people immediately, and the impact of war photography today is also increased by advances in camera technology and media presentation techniques.

Photographic images can now be edited and reproduced without using film or chemically based processes. Technologies such as high-resolution desktop scanners, image processing software, Photo CD and continuous tone printers are gradually replacing traditional chemically produced imagery. [25] Today the analog image from the television camera can be easily converted to digitized format and manipulated through the computer. The content of a photograph printed on photographic paper can be scanned into a computer, stored and manipulated as a digitized image. This phenomenon of the electronic darkroom has important implications for photographic archivists.

Historians use the word "provenience" to describe the history of a photograph's origin and ownership including changes in context or technology which have affected the photograph and its interpretation. When changes in form, content or context that affect interpretation can be identified, the historical value of the photograph is preserved, and the photograph can be used as documentation. The historical record of the photograph is intact when changes in the prints can be noted and analyzed. With Civil War photographs, for example, the original glass plate was usually cleaned and reused. Second and succeeding generation copies became the historical record. Although the original plate may no longer exist, the likelihood of changes from the negative to a contact print is minimal because the technology was relatively primitive. Digitized photography makes it almost impossible to detect changes made by editing.

Thus, it becomes increasingly important to have access to the original photograph and information about any subsequent changes made by photographers or editors. If the original photograph (the negative) is preserved, then a trail is left for history's detectives. The value of the photograph as "evidence" is enhanced by a record on film and by documentation of the changes at all stages when digitized imagery is used. Regardless of how the photograph is produced, it is important to remember that:

> The camera is the eye of history
> ...you must never make bad pictures.
> ...Mathew Brady [26]

List of Reference Notes

[1] Taft, Robert. 1938. *Photography and the American Scene: A Social History.* NY: Dover Publications, 195.

[2] Brady's Photographs: Pictures of the Dead at Antietam", *The New York Times*, 20 October 1863, p. 5, 6.

[3] Frassanito, William A. 1975. *Gettysburg: A Journey in Time.* NY: Charles Scribner's Sons.

[4] Davis, William C., ed. 1984. *The Image of War: 1862-1865*, Vol.1, *Shadows of the Storm.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 9.

[5] Gardner, Alexander. 1959. *Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the Civil War.* NY: Dover Publications.

[6] Taft, Robert. 1938. *Photography and the American Scene: A Social History.* NY: Dover Publications, 244.

[7] Davis, William C., ed. 1984. *The Image of War: 1862-1865*, Vol. 1, *Shadows of the Storm.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 10.

[8] Miller, Francis Trevelyan, ed. 1912. *The Photographic History of the Civil War in Ten Volumes.* Vol. 1, *The Opening Battles.* NY: The Review of Reviews Co.

[9] Paintings of Civil War scenes can be found in many books including *The Civil War.* 1991. NY: Ballantine Books.

[10] Trachtenberg, Alan. 1989. *Reading American Photographs; Images as History,* Mathew Brady to Walker Evans. NY: Hill and Wang, 98-99.

[11] Frassanito, William A. 1983. *Grant and Lee: The Virginia Campaigns 1864-1865.* 1983. NY: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Frassanito, William A. 1978. *Antietam: The Photographic Legacy of America's Bloodiest Days.* NY: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Frassanito, William A. 1975. *Gettysburg: A Journey in Time.* NY: Charles Scribner's Sons.

[12] Davis, William C. ed. 1981-1984. *The Image of War.* Vols. I-VI. NY: Doubleday.

[13] Fulton, Marianne. 1988. *Eyes of Time: Photojournalism in America.* Boston: Little Brown and Co.

[14] Burns, Ken. 1990. *The Civil War.* Produced and directed by Ken Burns. PBS Video.

[15] "What Horrors He Must Have Seen." (March 1992). *Yankee's Home Companion*, 62-67.

[16] Stapp, Will, Curator at the International Museum of Photography, George Eastman House, Rochester, NY. Interview by author, (telephone, 27 January).

[17] Burns, Ken. 1991. *The Great Arrogance of the Present is to Forget the Past.* Civil War hronicles 1 (Summer) : 8.

[18] Swanson, James L. and Lloyd Ostendorf. 1991. Lincoln from Life. *Civil War Chronicles* 1 (Summer) : 55.

[19] Wagner, Robert W. 1961. *The Image of the Civil War.* Audio Visual Communication Review 9 (Jan.-Feb.) : 4, 5.

[20] Horan, James D. 1955. *Mathew Brady: Historian with a Camera.* NY: Crown Publishers, Picture No. 93.

[21] Horan, James D. 1955. *Mathew Brady: Historian with a Camera.* NY: Crown Publishers, 244. Photography by Mathew Brady, November 15, 1963. Picture No. 148.

[22] Taft, Robert. 1938. *Photography and the American Scene: A Social History, 1839-1889.* NY; Dover Publications, 246.

[23] Wagner, Robert W. 1961. *The Image of the Civil War.* Audio Visual Communication Review 9 (Jan.-Feb.) : 6.

[24] Wagner, Robert, Professor Emeritus, Ohio State University. 1993. Interview by author (Columbus, OH 13 February).

[25] Future Image Inc. and *Computer Pictures.* (October 4-5, 1993). *Photography in the Digital Age: Technology and Issues Summit.* Symposium conducted at the Jacob K. Javits Center in New York City.

[26] Horan, James D. 1955. *Mathew Brady: Historian With a Camera.* NY: Crown Publishers, 90.